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Latin America's First Olympics: Mexico 1968

With barely two years to go before the 2016 Olympics, unsubstantiated rumours were circulating the international media claiming that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) was perturbed by the “state of unreadiness” in Rio de Janeiro. With only 10% of the infrastructure completed, the IOC was apparently making “informal, secretive enquiries” with a view to London taking on the Games if the Brazilians were unable to deliver (*Independent*, 10 May 2014). While the rumours provoked strong denials and even stronger reassurances from the IOC, there may have been more than a few Mexicans who could be forgiven for offering a wry smile: they had heard it all before.

Despite the cyclical nature of mega-sports events and the predictability of the controversies they attract, organising committees are keen to emphasise features that make their Games different. In the case of the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, several were easy to identify. This was the first time the Olympics had come to Latin America; indeed it was the first time a Spanish-speaking country had played host. It was the first time a nation from the euphemistically labelled ‘developing world’ had staged the Games. It was the first time a woman lit the Olympic flame, and the first time that televised images of the events were transmitted ‘live’ and in colour across the globe. It was also the first time that the Olympics and Football World Cup were held in the same country within two years; an occurrence that has seldom been repeated and would take until Brazil 2014 and 2016 for this to be achieved again in Latin America.

Mexico 68 also set a series of precedents that its organisers neither planned nor celebrated. It was one of the first in which the spectre of a large-scale international boycott seriously threatened to jeopardise the Games. It was one of the first at which competing athletes used the global sporting arena to make political protests. It was also one of the first in which the host nation’s sense of insecurity on the international stage led to heightened tensions at home. This produced a situation that would be witnessed in later Games: an international posture of inclusion and magnanimity existing simultaneously with domestic press censorship and containment of protests. An analysis of Mexico 68, therefore, offers an opportunity to scrutinise a host nation under multiple and varied strains, to compare its differing reactions to local and foreign protests, and to assess the ways in which the IOC fed into the equation.

The international boycott challenge

The threat of international sporting boycotts reached its zenith in 1980 when many western governments placed considerable pressure upon their athletes to withdraw from the Moscow Olympics. While such coercion met with varying levels of success, the absence of many world class athletes in Moscow, and again four years later in Los Angeles, emphatically refuted the IOC's insistence that politics had no place within the world of sport. In the same way that these Games would be violated by Cold War politics, Mexico 68 had already been placed in jeopardy by developments beyond its own borders; namely, the rising assertiveness of a post-colonial African continent seeking to ostracise apartheid South Africa.

To appreciate fully the ways in which Mexicans dealt with this challenge, we need to understand Mexico's position on the world stage. When Mexico City won the bid to host the Olympics in October 1963, Mexico understandably took this as a vote of confidence in its economic growth and political stability.¹ Yet considerations beyond Mexico's borders were equally important factors. From one perspective, Mexico City was the best of a bad bunch: Eastern bloc countries were unlikely to vote for either Detroit or Lyon because in 1962, the United States and France had refused visas for East German athletes to compete in their countries. In the wake of Indonesian President Sukarno's decision to create an Asian Games beyond the reach of IOC jurisdiction, the IOC was under pressure to recognise the presence of the emerging world within the sporting arena. As such, in 1963 the Olympic Movement was more predisposed to entertain bids from developing nations than had been the case in the past. Coming just one year after the Cuban Missile Crisis, some IOC delegates may have perceived the need for the West to embrace Latin American countries in order to help prevent the spread of the Cuban model. While Buenos Aires would have been a worthy competitor to Mexico City in this respect, ongoing political instability in Argentina severely undermined its case. The apparently overwhelming endorsement for Mexico City, therefore, may not necessarily have been a vote of confidence in the Mexican nation, nor its people: Cold War politics and the need to be seen to embrace the developing world made Mexico City a rational option (Brewster & Brewster 2010, pp.43-51).

That international support for Mexico was less than resounding was evident almost as soon as the ballot was counted. Critics drew attention to Mexico City's high altitude and pollution, questioned Mexico's ability to afford the Games, and argued that its 'mañana' culture would bring chaos to all organisational aspects of the Olympics. Such scepticism immediately placed the Mexican Organising Committee (MOC) on the defensive. It would be amidst fears of half-built installations and oxygen-starved athletes fighting for their lives that the MOC was to face its most serious diplomatic challenge. Following a wave of de-colonisation, the Mexico Games were the first to which many of

the newly-formed African nations were invited. When the inclusion of South Africa threatened to foster a widespread boycott by other African nations, the Mexicans moved decisively. Reflecting the then white, western-dominated predisposition of the IOC, its president, Avery Brundage, forcefully argued that South Africa's right to participate was in accordance with the Olympic Charter. In response, the Mexicans risked isolation and further international criticism by opposing him: with staunch support from Mexico's president, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, the MOC insisted on the withdrawal of South Africa's invitation.

While the threatened African boycott of the 1968 Olympics has been well documented, considerably less attention has been placed upon Mexico's early and adamant support for the African nations' position (Hill, 1996, pp. 207-17).² Mexico's motives are, however, worth considering because the controversy provides an example of a host nation adopting an alternative perspective on fundamental IOC principles. The MOC's public relations officer, Roberto Casellas, later reflected that Brundage had not been convinced that South Africa's presence in Mexico would provoke a mass boycott (Casellas, 1992, pp. 101-02). This, in itself, might explain why Brundage took this controversy to the wire. That the IOC president seriously miscalculated African and, indeed, Mexican resolve suggests a degree of complacency and a failure to recognise how the changing world would affect previous practices. Whether or not the Mexicans were displaying a greater degree of awareness of the global mood is a moot point. From a purely pragmatic point of view, the spectre of up to thirty-two African nations boycotting their first Olympic Games would have been a considerable blow to Mexico's reputation as host. An equally strong factor determining Mexico's stance, however, may have been its desire to prove itself on the international arena. At the time of the proposed boycott, criticisms of Mexico City's preparations were increasing in the Western media. As in the case of Brazil 2016, rumours circulated that an alternative venue was ready to step in should Mexico City default on its obligation to host the Games. More fundamental, perhaps, was the fact that US sports administrators joined other English-speaking delegates to demand South Africa's inclusion and Lord Exeter, vice-president of the IOC, issued thinly-veiled threats that should South Africa be excluded "many other members of our Movement" might not wish to participate in what would then be deemed to be a "political Games".³ As the nations of the IOC marshalled their forces on either side of the apartheid issue, Mexico remained firm. Reinforced by the support of other Latin American countries, the MOC was determined not to let Mexico 68 be hijacked by international heavy-weights (Brewster, 2001). The IOC eventually backed down and South Africa's invitation to attend the Games was withdrawn.

The significance of the threatened international boycott of Mexico 68 lies predominantly upon the posture of the IOC. Mexico could, with some justification, boast that it was free from the corrosive form of racism that maligned many western nations during this period. As such, its insistence on South Africa's exclusion was consistent with its purported position on apartheid; this also upheld the Olympic Charter's aspiration that the Games should be free of political interference or prejudice. One might have expected the IOC to be fully supportive of such a stance: certainly in the case of Moscow, Los Angeles and, more recently, the Sochi Winter Olympics, the IOC has stood shoulder-to-shoulder with host nations in rebuking international calls for boycotts on such grounds. Yet in the case of Mexico 68, the hosts and the IOC found themselves on opposing sides of a struggle between clashing principles. On one side was the imperative of racial equality within the sporting arena; on the other an insistence that domestic politics and global sport should not mix. Neither side wanted an international boycott to occur, but the differing perspectives of the host nation and the IOC resulted in conflicting views regarding which was the least damaging resolution to the dispute.

Domestic protest and its containment

For many observers, the tragic deaths of Israeli athletes in Munich 1972 marks the time when the Olympic Games lost its innocence. The increasing threat of international terrorism now means that security is a salient priority for any host nation. The safety of competitors and the public is an essential prerequisite for any mega sports event and the presence of security forces has become a familiar sight. For British athlete Mary Peters, however, fresh from the highly militarised environment of late 1960s Northern Ireland, the sight of security forces on the streets of Mexico City and within the Olympic village caused concern:

You saw these soldiers ... not many of them, mostly unarmed. I suppose they took us by a quiet route. But you suddenly started to think about the troubles and you felt a bit scared. It suddenly hit you what you were doing. But once you were in the stadium, all these feelings disappeared (cited by Samuel, 1968).

Yet the strong presence of Mexican security forces in 1968 was not to deter international terrorists. It was due to the fear of home-grown threats to disrupt the Games; a fear that would grow out of all proportion as the constant stream of international concerns regarding Mexico's ability to stage the Olympics made the Mexican government increasingly sensitive.

It has to be acknowledged that the Mexican political authorities were not adept at handling demonstrable expressions of opposition. Since the 1930s, political debates and dissent had

effectively taken place within the ruling party, the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PRI). The PRI had maintained power since 1929 with vote rigging and co-option ensuring the 'right' results in successive elections. National agrarian and labour movements operated within the system, and state patronage was variously deployed to soothe periodic tensions. Protests beyond the parameters of this tight framework were deemed to be a threat and often depicted as anti-patriotic. That the leaders of the 1958 railway workers' strike remained in prison a decade later, reveals much about the extent to which Mexico's democratic credentials as Olympic hosts were masking a different reality.

Indicative of a phenomenon that would be seen in later mega-sports events in developing nations, the Mexican authorities took decisive measures to eradicate all aspects of society that might corroborate foreign slurs on their nation. In August 1965, a national campaign to create an "Olympic Conscience" among the lower classes began. That such emphasis was given 'to teach Mexicans how to behave' reveals both a determination to ensure that the Games were successful and the genuine concerns of certain sectors of Mexican society (in agreement with much of the developed world) that when faced with the pressure of being in a critical world spotlight, Mexico might indeed fail (Estrada Núñez, 1965; Brewster, 2010, pp. 46-62). In the months leading up to the Games, hawkers, street sellers and slums were forcibly removed from areas of Mexico City likely to attract foreign visitors and relocated to less high-profile locations.

Within this socio-political environment channels for domestic criticism of Mexico's Olympic bid were limited. Although Mexico has no official censorship policy, in the 1960s and particularly during the presidency of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-70), the government strictly regulated the Mexican press. As the Olympic Games approached, journalists were further restricted by the MOC tactic of appealing to a sense of patriotic duty, fostering an atmosphere in which to oppose the Olympic effort was tantamount to betraying the country. Objections to hosting the Games were nonetheless voiced within Mexico and compelled the MOC to allay concerns raised. Criticisms about the cost of staging the Olympics, for example, were countered with details of the MOC's economic prudence and the immediate and long-term benefits to Mexican society that would spring from increased tourism, provision of sports facilities, and improved communications (*Excélsior*, 17 September 1966).

Yet the greatest threat to national stability did not come from impoverished sectors of society but from the educated middle classes and the consequent response of the security forces themselves. During the mid-twentieth century vociferous and articulate sectors of the younger generation began to reject the paternalistic intervention of the state in their lives. University campuses, especially

Mexico City's National University and Polytechnic, harboured a form of radicalism that frequently led to violent exchanges between students and authorities. By the 1960s, student activism represented an increasing threat as students reached out to other disgruntled sectors of society.⁴ On 22 July 1968, Mexican students, in common with their counterparts in several first-world countries, took to the streets of Mexico City to voice their discontent with a political system that no longer addressed their needs and concerns. Although some students criticised the use of public investment on Olympic sites to the detriment of social infrastructure projects, most of the students were not opposed to the Olympic Games. Indeed, many of them were working for the Olympic project as translators and guides. The Olympic stadium, situated within the University campus, was never a target for these rallies, and the nearby Olympic Village was never disturbed. Yet the authorities increasingly viewed the student protests as an attempt to disrupt the Games.⁵ In their efforts to remove such 'unsightly objects' from the streets of Mexico City many students were injured and arrested. On 18 September the National University campus was occupied by the army in an operation in which several students were killed.

The Mexican Student Movement ended in violent bloodshed on 2 October at Tlatelolco Square, Mexico City, just ten days before the Olympic Opening Ceremony. Although there is still considerable discrepancy regarding what actually happened, few would agree with the official version that students fired shots and that government forces responded in self-defence.⁶ Survivors claim that, as the meeting came to a close, tanks sealed off the square and the army then opened fire into the crowd (Poniatowska, 1971, pp. 166-71; Benítez, 1968, p. ii; Femat, 1968). In the ensuing chaos a considerable number of people were killed and injured, and thousands were arrested. Official statistics finally listed 43 civilian deaths and eight soldiers injured; other sources put the mortality figure at 500. The majority of victims were Mexican students.⁷

As journalist and author Elena Poniatowska later reflected, "the Tlatelolco massacre was practically silenced" in Mexican newspapers (1993, p. 9). A combination of intimidation, censorship, and perhaps an unwillingness to accept unconfirmed reports produced a compliant national press. Although some Mexican publications offered alternative versions on their inside pages, the main headlines were reserved for the forthcoming Olympics.⁸ The international press had fewer constraints and indeed the events at Tlatelolco provided one last reason to question the wisdom of holding the Games in Mexico City. Avery Brundage faced a barrage of questions from international reporters regarding safety guarantees for participants and spectators, and consequent changes to the programme.⁹ One of the more vociferous voices was that of John Rodda, sports correspondent

for the UK *Guardian* newspaper, who had witnessed the massacre. Rodda's vivid testimony, in which he estimated the death toll to be 500, was published as a front-page spread on 4 October (Rodda, 1968a). He attempted to speak to the IOC early in the morning of 3 October to explain the seriousness of what had happened, but met further hostility (Rodda, 2010, 17). In his journal, Brundage recorded how "a full avalanche of journalists" descended on the IOC office at 7 a.m. to see if the Games had been cancelled. He described the reporters as having been so persistent that "it took almost physical fighting to keep them out of the doors". He continued, "unfortunate as this incident was, the public opinion knew that the real objective was to frustrate the efforts of all Mexicans to stage the Games". Such assurances were, of course, merely repeating the uncorroborated Mexican government line. With barely concealed annoyance, Brundage concluded that the massacre was "an isolated incident regretfully covered by many journalists who have been welcome in the sincere belief that they were covering the sports events".¹⁰ Hours later the IOC issued a reassuring press statement that the Games would go ahead as planned.

Rodda later reflected that Brundage had been correct to insist that the Olympics should go ahead:

Had the Games been cancelled then, they may not have survived – they would have been halted in Munich four years later [...] the Moscow Boycott 1980 would probably have succeeded, and that in Los Angeles four years later would have had greater impact. Its dogged resilience in the face of political interference, demonstration and intimidation is the bedrock of Olympic survival (2010, p. 19).

Poniatowska, who had supported and has continued to work tirelessly for the student victims, would agree. She reported on the Games and celebrated Mexico's triumph. She explained, "the lamentable acts of the last weeks [...] hurt all of us", but underlined that she was also tremendously proud that Mexico was staging the Games and was determined not to allow the brutal massacre to spoil the achievements of the country as a whole (1968, p. 5).

Yet most Mexicans' memories of 1968 can nonetheless be encapsulated in just one word - "Tlatelolco". They rarely reflect upon their successful Olympics. This is largely to do with the government's denial of any wrong-doing and the ongoing campaign led by the Mexican intelligentsia to clarify what happened and to apportion blame. Indeed, a veritable "Tlatelolco" literature spawned in the decades that followed; one which promises to gain further momentum as the fiftieth anniversary approaches. In the international press, conversely, interest in the human rights of Mexicans quickly disappeared from the headlines. Once the Games began, attention turned to the sporting achievements. Following the Closing Ceremony, the Olympic caravan moved to Munich where a different human tragedy would temporarily shake the confident stride of the Olympic

movement. The most enduring foreign memory of the Mexico 68 Games is not the massacre of protesters that took place on the streets of Mexico City, but an entirely different protest that took place within the Olympic Stadium: the so-called 'Black Power' salute.

Foreign protest in Mexican space

When the US athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos each put on a black glove and raised a fist during the medal ceremony for the 200 metres final, their gesture blended improvisation with conviction. While their accounts differ in the details, it appears that the decision to wear black socks and gloves and to remove their shoes was only formulated as they walked into the Olympic arena to receive their medals (Henderson, 2010, pp. 79-80). Yet the sentiments behind their protest were anything but spontaneous. Throughout the months leading up to the Olympics, an active campaign had been taking place on US campuses and training camps which aimed to use the Mexico Olympics to draw attention to the civil rights struggle in the United States. Revisionist analysis of the podium protest convincingly argues that it would be wrong to describe it as a 'Black Power' salute. Rather, Smith and Carlos were acting under the badge of the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR), a movement that had an undoubted racial egalitarian agenda, but that also attracted many white sympathisers from both within the US Olympic team and the broader civil rights movement in the United States (Henderson, 2010, pp. 78-92). What would become an iconic gesture that defined the Mexico Games around the world, began as a US domestic debate concerning whether attending or boycotting the Games would best serve the OPHR cause.

For those within the US Olympic camp and those who appreciated the intensity of the OPHR debate within the United States, the Smith and Carlos podium protest caused a mixture of emotions: astonishment, admiration, fear, opposition. The IOC reaction was unequivocal: Avery Brundage demanded that the US Olympic Committee should suspend the two athletes and expel them from the Olympic Village. He also instructed them to issue a formal apology to the IOC, the MOC, and "to the people of Mexico for the discourtesy displayed by two members of its team".¹¹ Yet there is no evidence that the MOC and Mexicans shared Brundage's indignation. Within the Olympic arena, the small audience that witnessed the protest displayed a mixture of bemusement and quiet respect for the US national anthem. The immediate reaction in the Mexican press was merely to report it. Interestingly, more reflective pieces showed understanding and solidarity with Smith and Carlos (Aymami, 1968; Nanclares, 1968). The MOC kept a diplomatic silence at the time, but the inclusion of the protest in the official Olympics film indicates where sympathies lay. In August 1969 an

incensed Brundage sent a sharp letter to the MOC president Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, copied to all IOC members, in which he stated the “nasty demonstrations against the United States flag by negroes” had no place in the film.¹² Ramírez Vázquez defended its insertion, arguing that to omit any important incident that had taken place within the Olympic arena “would have been much more notorious”.¹³ Under pressure from Brundage, Ramírez Vázquez did remove the scene from the edition of the film sent to IOC members, but copies destined for commercial outlets had already been distributed.

The differing reactions to the podium protest deserve further analysis. Brundage was resolute in the IOC’s stance: any political protest by athletes during the Olympics would result in immediate expulsion. That such a warning had been on the IOC agenda suggests that Brundage was not only aware of the OPHR debate within the United States but also of the likelihood that some manifestation of solidarity for the cause would arise in Mexico City (Brewster & Brewster, 2010, p. 142). It would be fruitless to debate whether Brundage’s uncompromising position was due to his imperative to protect the Olympic movement or, as his detractors contend, because he harboured racist tendencies.¹⁴ The end result was the same: the IOC condemned using the sporting arena for political purposes. Yet had this view been shared by the hosts, one might have expected at least some sign of indignation that Mexican hospitality had been abused by the protest. Instead, the Mexican government, MOC and public opinion appeared to have been much more relaxed. After all, African American members of the US team had not, in the end, boycotted the Games and as a result Mexico 68 was treated to some of the most memorable feats of athleticism in Olympic history. While unrest within the US team at the Olympic village was palpable, neither the podium protest nor any less overt forms of non-conformity adversely affected the smooth running of the Games. There may also have been some inward pleasure among Mexicans that the United States, whose press and officials had so vociferously questioned the wisdom of hosting the Games in Mexico, should have had its own dirty linen aired on Mexico’s well-constructed global stage.¹⁵

Patterns of behaviour

An analysis of the 1968 Olympics reveals the ways in which diverse interested parties reacted to the challenges the hosts faced. From Mexico’s perspective, there was a clear distinction between international protests and those of its own people. Mexico adopted a liberal, humanitarian approach towards international protests, one that was in keeping with its self-portrayal as a modern nation with good race relations, which respected human rights and the integrity of nation states. Its

strong support for African nations against the inclusion of apartheid South Africa was consistent with its failure to express indignation at Smith's and Carlos's podium protest. In both these cases, Mexico's stance was different from that of the IOC Executive board. One might argue that Mexico's attitude was the more prescient in that the rise of Third World consciousness and civil rights agendas would soon cause significant changes in the culture of global sporting institutions.

At a domestic level, however, Mexico's press censorship and its brutal suppression of the Student Movement were far from liberal and contrary to the image that Mexico sought to create overseas. The explanation for this reveals the paradox within Mexican society in the 1960s. The Student Movement of 1968 was merely the latest, and admittedly the most public, display of a nation that was finding it hard to embrace new forms of political engagement.¹⁶ Mexico was still led by politicians who had conveyed the country from economic and political instability into an era of prosperity and prolonged civilian government. That Mexico had bucked the Latin American trend of economic bankruptcy and military dictatorships was due to the strong, paternalistic hand that the ruling party laid upon the shoulders of its people. Hence while the Mexican elite's craving for acceptance into the community of the developed world recognised the need for altruism at an international level, the foundations upon which such aspirations depended meant that it could not afford to loosen control of its own people. Compounded by increased international scrutiny over Mexico's ability to host the Games, national prestige demanded that the tried and tested solution to internal disturbances was deployed to maintain order: force.

Regarding the utility of the Mexico City Games for understanding more recent developments within the staging of mega sporting events, our thoughts are more tentative and await analysis of events that have yet to take place. Nonetheless, the ways in which domestic and international protests were manifest at Mexico 68 offer interesting benchmarks for judging subsequent events. Firstly, it is clear that Mexico 68 heralded the era of threatened boycotts by individual or groups of nations. Reflecting the nature of global politics during the last 50 years, the impulse for later boycotts changed to Cold War ideologies and then reverted to human rights. There is little doubt that in 1968 the threat of a boycott was very real: African national Olympic committees simply would not have countenanced their athletes going to Mexico if South Africa was included. Similarly, in the case of US athletes to Moscow or Soviet athletes to Los Angeles, an all-or-nothing approach was adopted. Yet increasingly in the contemporary sporting arena, demands for boycotts have not emanated from governments, but from various human rights organisations. In the case of the United States in the mid-1960s, sympathy for the OPHR's overall objectives was severely tempered, and eventually

defeated, by the ambitions of individual athletes. Some argued that the best way to showcase African American potential was to underline its prowess in the international sporting arena. Others believed that individual sacrifice of Olympic ambitions was too high a price to pay for a social ill that would be best remedied outside the world of sport. These same responses were seen in Beijing 2008 and Sochi 2014. Despite vociferous campaigns by international human rights and gay rights groups against a Russian law making the provision of information on homosexuality to under-18s a crime, there was no major boycott of the 2014 Winter Olympics. Foreign dignitaries may have stayed away out of conviction or for political posturing, but it was left to the consciences of individual athletes as to whether or not they should compete and how they could show solidarity with the issues raised by protesters.

In the case of Mexico 68, individual athletes made a conspicuous stand in the most dramatic way. The podium protest arguably drew more attention to the plight of African Americans than any blanket boycott could have hoped to achieve. While sporting aficionados might continue to rue the absence of the world's elite at Moscow in 1980, a more casual observer of sport is much more likely to remember the raised fists of the two African American athletes in 1968. Yet such action by individual athletes, or indeed groups of athletes, has not become a common occurrence in sporting events. Prior to the Sochi Winter Olympics there was much talk about how foreign athletes might compete in their events and then circumvent Russian restrictions to make high profile protests in support of gay rights. In the event, no major protests took place and within days of the Closing Ceremony international focus on gay rights within Russia was distracted by the country's conflictive relationship with Ukraine.¹⁷

One aspect of the Mexico Games that can inform present debates concerning the staging of mega sports events is the connection between the relative wealth of a host nation, the nature of popular protest, and the ways in which authorities deal with such protests. While the vast expenditure on any Olympic Games sets off an internal debate based upon cost/benefit analysis, its intensity is far more deeply felt in countries with a great inequality of wealth. In the cases of Mexico 1968 and 1970 and Brazil 2014 and 2016, the host nations could argue that being selected to stage both the Olympics and the Football World Cup provided demonstrable international recognition of their economic strength and political stability. Certainly in the 1960s the international business community regarded Mexico in very much the same light as it currently views Brazil: a leading regional economic player that offers profitable business opportunities. Yet in the developing world economic growth masks deep levels of inequality, as witnessed by the stark contrast between the

ultramodern high-rise office buildings and the slum dwellings that are a common feature of Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro. As such, it should come as no surprise that many of the scenes that took place prior to Mexico 68 are being replicated in Brazil: forceful clearance of slum areas, removal of street traders, protests against rising bus prices, and demands that government funding should be spent on deprived areas rather than Olympic projects. So too, the heavy-handed tactics deployed by Mexican security officials to quell disturbances are present in Brazil. Whereas visitors and athletes may have become accustomed to the high security measures that now accompany mega-sporting events, in the developing world these have long been the norm. The vital difference is that security measures in the developed world are to deter international terrorism, whereas security guards in Mexico City and Rio are to protect the competitors and spectators from perceived malefactors within the host population.

Staging a mega sports event places any host country under exceptional international scrutiny. Yet would-be hosts assert confidence in their ability to fulfil their obligations and demonstrate their potential on the world stage. From the time a bid has triumphed until the closing ceremony, all aspects of organisation are focused on making these aspirations a reality. These preparations are much more intense in developing countries in which everyday reality is often far removed from the idealised version depicted by the bidding team. The need to conceal this gap places additional pressures on the hosting nation and becomes manifest in a variety of ways: crackdowns on dissenters, the removal of 'anti-social elements', and the over-elaborate renovation of public spaces. In doing so, blemishes appear in the smooth veneer that the host offers to the international community, as does an inner fear that the country's denigrators could be right. In the case of Mexico 68, the imperative to maintain a façade of social harmony provoked a degree of repression that seriously jeopardised that very objective. Yet in the final analysis, as soon as the Olympic flame ignites the opening ceremony, local issues and concerns retreat into the shadows as others take the stage. And as the flame is extinguished, the critical world spotlight switches to the next host. For many international observers the legacy of any Olympic Games barely extends beyond the celebratory scenes immortalised in the official film.

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End notes

¹ The first round ballot was Mexico City 20 votes, Detroit 14, Lyon 12, Buenos Aires 2. The result was so emphatic that a second round was not necessary.

² For Mexico's stance see Brewster & Brewster 2010, pp. 68-73.

³ For details of the IOC correspondence and debate concerning the South Africa issue see: the Historical Archive of the International Olympic Committee (hereafter IOC/HA): file no. 0101561, Comites Nationaux

Olympiques (Afrique du Sud 1968). Also see various correspondence relating to South Africa in the IOC/HA: Brundage Microfilm Collection Reel 103, Box 179.

⁴ In 1958, for example, students joined protesters demonstrating against rising bus fares in Mexico City. The ensuing demonstrations resulted in the destruction of buses and the violent intervention by security forces and the injury and/or imprisonment of protesters (Pensado, 2013, pp. 129-131).

⁵ On 1 September Díaz Ordaz took a firm line against those who for “ideological and political” ends were denigrating Mexico and “perhaps sought to prevent the staging of the Olympic Games”. Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, “IV Informe de Gobierno del Presidente Constitucional de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos”, 1 September 1968, 203, 260 in Informes Presidenciales, <http://www.diputados.gob.mx/cedia/sia/re/RE-ISS-09-06-13.pdf>, accessed 19 August 2007.

⁶ For accounts in English see Poniatowska, 1991; Adler Hellman, 1983; Paz, 1985; Mabry, 1982; Brewster, 2005, pp. 35-68.

⁷ It is claimed that most Mexicans believe between 300 and 400 people died (Meyer, Sherman & Deeds, 2003, p. 670; Paz, 1970, p. 38; Poniatowska, 1971, p. 170; Rodda, 1968b; Rodda, 1968a; Ortiz Pinchetti, 1978, p. 11).

⁸ For a discussion of the part played by *Excélsior* and the weekly magazine *Siempre* in informing Mexicans about the massacre see Brewster 2002.

⁹ IOC/HA, Brundage Microfilm Collection, Reel 46, Box 84, 13-15.

¹⁰ IOC/HA, Brundage Microfilm Collection, Reel 46 Box 84, 6-7. ‘A.B.’s Visit to Mexico’, Chicago, 21 February 1970, pp. 6-8.

¹¹ IOC/HA, Commission, Executive Board, Mexico City, 30 September – 6 October 1968, Annex V, 17 October 1968. For a discussion of the protest see Henderson, 2010.

¹² IOC/HA, Brundage Microfilm Collection, reel 78, box 138, letter, 19 August 1969.

¹³ IOC/HA, Brundage Microfilm Collection, reel 102, box 178, letters, 29 September 1969 from Ramírez Vázquez to Brundage and 11 October 1969 from Brundage to Ramírez Vázquez.

¹⁴ For an interesting contextual discussion regarding such accusations see Brichford, 1998, pp. 129-134.

¹⁵ While most focus has been placed on the podium protest of Smith and Carlos, it should be remembered that the Australian sprinter, Greg Norman, also showed his support by wearing an OPHR badge during the medal ceremony. Equally significant, the Czech gymnast, Vera Caslavská gained much sympathy from the Mexican public for her protest against the Soviet invasion of her country. Sharing gold medal position with the Soviet gymnast, Larisa Petrik, she turned and bowed her head away from the Soviet flag as it was being raised.

¹⁶ In this, we tend to agree with recent studies that reject the dominant narrative that presents the massacre as a watershed in Mexico’s move towards democracy (Zolov, 1999; Pensado, 2013).

¹⁷ Two snowboarders Alexey Sobolev (Russia) and Cheryl Maas (Netherlands) did offer forms of visual protests: Sobolev carried a Pussy Riot design on his board and Maas raised a rainbow design glove to TV cameras.